

December 2005

Sufism: Islamic Mysticism

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Recommended Citation

Smith, James L. Jr. (2005) "Sufism: Islamic Mysticism," *Verbum*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 10.
Available at: <https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/verbum/vol3/iss1/10>

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Sufism is the esoteric aspect of Islam. The aim of Sufis is to gain direct knowledge of the eternal, in this life, as opposed to the exoteric, or traditionalist, aspect of Islam which focuses on achieving a state of blessedness after death by way of carrying out divinely prescribed works. The history of Sufism is a long one, some tracing it directly back to The Prophet Muhammad."

Research



Papers

*** *Prize provided by Dr. Michael Costanzo*

Sufism: Islamic Mysticism

By James Smith

Part I- Introduction

Sufism is the esoteric aspect of Islam. The aim of Sufis is to gain direct knowledge of the eternal, in this life, as opposed to the exoteric, or traditionalist, aspect of Islam which focuses on achieving a state of blessedness after death by way of carrying out divinely prescribed works. The history of Sufism is a long one, some tracing it directly back to The Prophet Muhammad.

Sufi mysticism shares many things in common with mystics of other religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism and Zoroastrianism. This is one of the major critiques of Sufism by Muslim scholars, that its origins are not solely from Islam, but borrowed from other religions. Some of the thoughts expressed by myself may also be the same as other writers. Regardless of various critiques, Sufism is widely accepted by the Muslim community and is often referred to as “the heart of Islam.”

Part II- What is Sufism?

The word Sufi is derived from the Arabic word al-tasawwuf, which means “divine wisdom.” It has also been suggested that the term Sufi is a derivation of the Greek word for wisdom, sophia. Sufis--as practitioners of Sufism are called--see themselves to be on a spiritual journey toward God. While all Muslims believe that they are on the pathway to God and will become close to God in Paradise after death and the ‘Final Judgment’, Sufis also believe that it is possible to become close to God and to experience this closeness, while one is still alive. The mystic seeks to accomplish this by means of what he or she describes as the tar_ qah (the path) that will lead a person to become one with the Creator. (Farah, 214)

Furthermore, the Sufis assert attainment of the knowledge that comes with such intimacy with God, Sufis assert, is the very purpose of the creation. Here they mention the hadith in which God states, "I was a hidden treasure and I loved that I be known, so I created the creation in order to be known." Hence, for the Sufis, there is already a momentum, a continuous attraction on their hearts exerted by God, pulling them in love towards God. They experience the joyful ecstasy of being gently drawn to their Eternal Beloved.

The path of Sufism can be broken down into stages, though the number of stages may vary depending on the Sufi master. "Sufi writers agreed, first of all, that the journey of the soul could be broken down into identifiable stages. 'Attar's seven valleys present an abridged version; most Sufi masters break the journey into many more stages. Many also distinguish between stations (maqamat), which the Sufi arrives at through discipline and effort, and states (ahwal), which are a pure gift of God's grace and cannot be manufactured by human effort." (Brown, 155)

The first station on the path is Mujahada, which means the greater jihad, or spiritual struggle. This struggle is for the Sufi a struggle against himself, against his habits and passions.

The second station is Zuhd, an ascetic renunciation. At this stage, the Sufi relinquishes all desires for worldly things, including permissible ones.

The next station is Samt, in which Sufis must remain silent and control their tongue. "There are two types of silence: outer silence and silence of the heart and mind. The heart of one who trusts completely in God is silent, not demanding any means for living. The gnostic's heart is silent in the face of the divine decree through the attribute of harmony." (Brown, 156)

The fourth station on the Sufi path to enlightenment is Tawakkul, which is defined as trust in God. It is the desire to remain absolutely content with God, despite one's dependence on

worldly things such as food and drink. When a S_f_ reaches this stage on the path, he has complete faith that God will provide for him, and he will remain serene even in the face of privation.

The next stage on the path is 'Ub_d_ya, which means to be a slave, or servant, of God. It is during this stage when the S_f_ builds the Abd (servant) and Mab_d (master) relationship. "It is intermediate between worship and adoration: 'One who does not begrudge God his soul is in the state of worship, one who does not begrudge God his heart is in the state of servitude, and one who does not begrudge God his spirit is in the state of adoration'" (Brown, 156)

The sixth station is Ir_da, in which S_f_s replaces all their worldly desires with a desire for God. This stage is associated with Rida, which is a satisfaction with what one has and becomes peaceful.

The next station on the path is Dhikr, or remembrance of God. This is a state in which the S_f_ is constantly aware of God. "[Dhikr] is the very foundation of this path. No one reaches God save by continual remembrance of Him. There are two kinds of remembrance: that of the tongue and that of the heart. The servant attains perpetual remembrance of the heart by making vocal remembrance." (Brown, 156)

The eighth station on the S_f_ path to God is Wil_ya. Wil_ya is the friendship with God. This stage can be likened to Sainthood, in that the S_f_ in the stage of Wil_ya has given himself entirely over to God. He has been granted protection from major sins and has been given the ability to perform miraculous deeds.

The ninth stage is Ma'rifa, which is characterized as having mystic knowledge. It is a form of revelation in which knowledge enters the heart directly from God. "[Ma'rifa is] the attribute of one who knows God (may he be exalted) by His names and attributes and is truthful

toward God by his deeds, who then purifies himself of base qualities and defects, who stands long at the door, and who withdraws his heart continually (from worldly matters). Then he enjoys a goodly nearness to God, who verifies him as true in all his states. The temptations of his soul cease, and he does not incline his heart to any thought that would incite him to other-than-God.” (Brown, 157) This stage is also considered the ascending path because it is at the stage of Ma’rifa that the S_f_ becomes very near to God.

The next station is Mahabba, the loving stage. In this state the S_f_ glorifies God and tries to gain His pleasure. He cannot bear to be separated from Him, urgently longs for Him, makes continual remembrance of Him, and finds no comfort in anything other than Him. It is at this stage that one gives himself over completely to God.

The eleventh and final station is Shawq. Shawq is a yearning or passionate longing for meeting the Creator. “Longing is the state of commotion in the heart hoping for meeting the Beloved.” (Brown, 157)

It is important to remember that there are many different versions of the stations on the path of S_f_ enlightenment. The steps listed above are only an abridged version; they are some of the more interesting stages of the tar_qah, as viewed by al-Qushayr_, an eleventh-century S_f_ systematizer. Al-Qushayr_ enumerates a total of forty two subsequent stations and states. “According to a had_th, there are as many paths to God as there are children of Adam, and although, needless to say, an indefinite number of paths did not come into being, over time a large number of turuq (pl. of tar_qah) did develop that were able to cater to different spiritual and psychological human types. Usually called S_f_ orders, these paths have protected and promulgated the esoteric teachings of Islam to this day and still constitute a vital element in Islamic society.” (Nasr, 81)

Part III- Tracing the origins of Sufism

During the eighth and ninth centuries C.E., a new emphasis began to develop within the religion of Islam. Modern research has proven that the origin of Sufism cannot be traced back to a single definite cause. “The truth is that Sufism is a complex thing, and therefore no simple answer can be given to the question how it originated.” (Nicholson, 9)

Early Sufis were actually ascetics rather than mystics. The search for deeper meaning began with a pietistic asceticism, which in turn led to the development of the popular mystical side of Islam. “An overwhelming consciousness of sin, combined with a dread—which it is hard for us to realize—of Judgment Day and the torments of Hell-fire, so vividly painted in the Koran, drove them to seek salvation in flight from the world.” (Nicholson, 4)

The first traces of Sufism can be found here. The Sufis themselves however argue against such origins. They claim that Sufism originated with the Prophet Muhammad, that Muhammad was the first Sufi. This is important, for if the Sufi spiritual quest is to be viewed as legitimate, even within Islam itself, it must be rooted in the Qur’an and the sunna of Muhammad. In defense of Sufi legitimacy, some Muslims argue that it was simply a response to the growing materialism in the Islamic world.

To fully examine the traces of Sufism in history, we must look to the influences of other religions on Sufism. Christian influences can be seen in Sufi practices and many Gospel texts and sayings of Jesus are cited in the oldest Sufi biographies. “*We have seen that the woolen dress, from which the name ‘Sufi’ is derived, is of Christian origin: vows of silence, litanies (dhikr), and other ascetic practices may be traced to the same source.*” (Nicholson, 10)

Evidence of Neo-Platonic ideas is also found in old Sufi literature. Aristotle, Plato’s student, was a dominant figure in Muslim philosophy. Aristotle and a member of the school of

Neo-Platonism, Dionysius, made available to Muslims the Greek mystical ideas, which they readily adapted to their own religion.

Buddhism may also play a significant role in the development of Sufism. “We hear of flourishing Buddhist monasteries in Balkh, the metropolis of ancient Bactria, a city famous for the number of S_f_s who resided in it. Professor Goldziher has called attention to the significant circumstance that the S_f_ ascetic, Ibr_h_m ibn Adham, appears in Moslem legend as a prince of Balkh who abandoned his throne and became a wandering dervish—the story of Buddha over again. The S_f_s learned the use of rosaries from Buddhist monks, and, without entering into details, it may be safely asserted that the method of S_fism, so far as it is one of ethical self-culture, ascetic meditation, and intellectual abstraction, owes a good deal to Buddhism.”

(Nicholson, 16- 17)

Influences of other religions can also be found in Sufism. Traces of Jewish mysticism, Gnosticism, Hinduism, and Zoroastrianism can all be found in the practices and literature of early Sufism.

PartIV- Islamic Criticism of Sufism

As shown in the previous section, it is possible that the origins of Sufism were greatly influenced by outside (Non-Islamic) sources. This is the source for a common criticism of Sufism, that it is bid'ah (innovation) and thus is not authentically Islamic. The S_f_ response to this criticism is often that the S_f_ way is not bid'ah, but is rooted in the Qur'an and originates directly from the Prophet Muhammad. Muhammad often meditated for days at a time in the cave atop Mt. Hir_ which overlooks Mecca. This is also the place where he received the first revelation from God. The Prophet's night journey, in which he flew to Jerusalem on the winged

stead, Bur_q, had a mystical quality to it that represented a journey to God. According to Sufi doctrine a number of verses in the Qur'an provide clear support for their mysticism. Perhaps the most often quoted as a proof is Surah 24:35, "Allah is the Light of Heaven and Earth! His light may be compared to a niche in which there is a lamp; the lamp is in a glass; the glass is just as if it were a glittering star kindled from a blessed olive tree, { which is } neither Eastern nor Western, whose oil will almost glow though the fire has never touched it. Light upon light, Allah guides anyone He wishes to His light."

Another of the criticisms often leveled at Sufis by their fellow Muslims is that they withdraw from social and political activity. This may or may not be true depending on geographic location. For example, S_f_s in Muslim central Asia often participate in public affairs, including warfare. Most S_f_ orders still hold true to the five Pillars of Islam, including the public and societal deeds that they entail. Despite the various criticisms of Sufism, it is widely accepted by Muslim communities worldwide.

PartV- S_f_ Interpretation of the Qur'an

Just as the Qur'an is the cornerstone of the Islamic faith, so the S_f_s interpret the Qur'an to their own purpose. Since Sufism is the inner aspect of Islam, its doctrine can be said to be a commentary on the esoteric nature of the Qur'an itself. Islamic scholar, Titus Burckhardt in his work, *An Introduction to Sufism*, writes: "It might be said that the ordinary exegesis of the Qur'an takes the expressions in their immediate meanings whereas the Sufi exegesis uncovers their transposed meanings, or, again, that while exotericism understands them conventionally the Sufi interpretation conceives their direct, original and spiritually necessary character. When, for example, the Qur'an says that he who accepts God's guidance will be guided 'for himself'

(linafsihi) and that he who remains ignorant is so 'on himself' ('ala nafsihi) (see Qur'an, xvii, 14 and also iv,104) the exoteric interpretation is limited to the idea of the recompense and punishment. The Sufi understands this verse of the Qur'an in the sense of the sayings of the Prophet: 'He who knows himself (nafsahu) knows his Lord.'" (Burckhardt, 42)

In the eighth and ninth centuries there emerged two main categories of Qur'anic exegesis. The first and most widely used is the tafs_r, the exoteric interpretation. It is based on analyses of grammar, linguistics, historical context, and relation to earlier Judeo-Christian scriptures. The second method is ta'wil, the esoteric interpretation. This interpretation is associated with the Sh_'ah and S_f_ exegetes. "For Sufis, ta'wil unlocked the hidden (b_tin) mystical meanings of the Qur'_n." (Katz, 139) The different interpretations of the Qur'an represent the wide spectrum of Islamic belief. On one end of the spectrum, the exoteric tafs_r is used by the traditional Sunni Muslims. The ta'wil interpretation was used by the Sh_'ah, who intended to focus on the hidden meanings of the Qur'an to legitimize the claims of 'Al_ to the caliphate and to support the theology of the Im_m. On the other end of the spectrum, the S_f_ Muslims used ta'w_l to explore their mystical and spiritual theology. "Sufi ta'wil is predicated on the conviction that the Qur'_n is a living document, a 'thou' rather than an 'it.' Esoteric insight depends on the continued spiritual growth of the individual Sufi. The relationship between Sufi and sacred word is dynamic: as the Sufi achieves greater levels of spiritual insight, the word reveals more of its hidden meanings." (Katz, 140)

Part VI- Conclusion

As we can see, Sufism is a very complex aspect of Islam. There is disagreement over the nature of its origins and the legitimacy of its claim to be part of Islam. The history of Sufism is a

very long and fascinating topic. S_f_s are very dedicated to the spiritual path to reach the Divine in this life. Oftentimes, mysticism is given a negative connotation, and mystics are considered to be insane or somewhat disturbed mentally. The S_f_s, however, play an important role in Muslim society as the esoteric, inner aspect of Islam and they are often considered to be the “Heart of Islam.” They have certainly shown to be very passionate, as is shown in the works of Rumi and other S_f_ writers. Sufism is a widely popular and growing form of belief that will remain strong for many years to come.

I wish to close with a brief poem by perhaps the greatest of all Sufi poets:

“Dance, when you’re broken open. Dance, if you’ve torn
the bandage off. Dance in the middle of the fighting.
Dance in your blood.
Dance, when you’re perfectly free.” (Rumi)

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